

U.N. Panel Questions Vatican Officials on Child Sex Abuse

By NICK CUMMING-BRUCEJAN. 16, 2014

GENEVA — In an unusual appearance before a United Nations committee, Vatican officials faced questions on Thursday about the Holy See's handling of sexual abuse of children by the clergy.

The officials, including Msgr. Charles J. Scicluna, who served as the Vatican's chief sex crimes prosecutor for a decade up to 2012, are appearing before the Committee on the Rights of the Child to show how the Vatican is implementing a legally binding convention promoting child rights, which it signed in 1990.

Human rights organizations and groups representing victims of clerical abuse welcomed the hearing as the first occasion the Vatican has had to publicly defend its record.

"It's a moment that has given hope and encouragement to victims across the globe," Barbara Blaine, president of the Chicago-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said in Geneva ahead of the hearing.

Amid the shake-up launched by Pope Francis in the 10 months since he took office, rights groups also saw Thursday's hearing as an occasion that could shed light on the pontiff's approach to dealing with the clerical abuse scandal.

Pope Francis announced last month the creation of a new committee to tackle clerical abuse but has so far said little on the scandal that rocked the Roman Catholic Church around the world.

In questions posed by the U.N. committee before the hearing, the Vatican was asked to provide details of cases of sexual abuse committed by clergy that were brought to its attention, to detail measures for ensuring clergy accused of sexual abuse did not remain in contact with children, and to explain what explicit instructions it had given to ensure compulsory reporting of sexual abuse to the competent national authorities together with the cases where instructions had been given not to report abuse.

Written answers from the Vatican emphasized the distinction between the Holy See and the Catholic Church and said that although it encouraged adherence to the principles of the convention globally, it was responsible only for implementing the convention in the territory of the Vatican City State.

“It was quite shocking. It was a pretty direct, pretty blunt effort to sidestep the questions,” Pam Spees, an attorney with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which is seeking to hold Vatican officials responsible for sexual abuse crimes, said in an interview.